THE COTTONWOOD BLACK

Anonymous

In 1915 Jim McNab left his ranch on the Cottonwood not far from the town of Macleod, and went to war. Jim was young, and when he departed, he was rapidly becoming one of the best riders in all Canada. In France he fought long and well . . . clear through until the Armistice on November 11, 1918.

While he was away a number of colts were foaled on the ranch; among them a coal-black, offspring of a thoroughbred mother and a Morgan-Percheron sire. From the mother the colt inherited speed and courage, from the father, strength and size. As the youngster grew, he developed such spirit and love of independence that the boys on the ranch often commented that he would develop into a great range horse -- if anybody could break him. They called him Midnight.

When Jim returned to the Cottonwood, Midnight stood fifteen and a half hands high, a magnificent young horse, completely wild, ready to be broken, and there was much speculation among the ranch-hands as to whether the boss would attempt the job.

McNab, however, was eager to get back into the routine interrupted by the war, and one of the first things he did on his return was to set about breaking the young

horses raised during his absence. He knew that Midnight would probably offer the biggest task of all the young stock, and McNab decided that he would break the other horses first. The boys thought maybe Jim had forgotten how to ride, but he showed them that he still knew the tricks and had very little trouble breaking a number of the young, green horses. Finally it was Midnight's turn.

The horse was driven into a small pasture with a number of tame horses, and when Midnight had finally been cut out and into the corral, Jim knew that he was facing the struggle of his life. The horse was roped, saddled, and at last it was time for Jim to mount. The boys had long been looking forward to the contest, and they knew, as did Jim, that if Midnight could buck as well as he looked, the chances were slim that the boss could "stick him".

Jim mounted, and when the "blind" was jerked, Midnight paused a moment, perplexed by the human weight on his back; then he headed for the open corral gate, and the friends grazing outside in the pasture.

The boys said afterwards that they had never seen such a bucking . Jim lasted exactly five jumps, was thrown off and hit hard.

The boys were watching the boss, wondering how he would take it; but Jim only said:

"Get him back in here."

Once again the black was driven into the corral, roped; and once again Jim climbed aboard. This time he lasted a couple of jumps longer before he was thrown with such terrific force that the boys ran to see how badly he was hurt. But Jim wasn't hurt. He got to his feet, gazed after Midnight who had once again rejoined his friends in the pasture, and said:

"Boys, that black will be the greatest horse in all Canada. Just drive him back in here."

This time, before mounting Midnight again, Jim sat with the other men and discussed the young horse's technique. Midnight resorted only to straight bucking. He didn't "sun-fish" or "fence-row" as so many bucking horses do in order to get rid of their riders.

Jim was thrown a third time, and now the boys expected the boss to resort to unfair tactics in order to break the spirit of the black, but Jim refused to do this. If the horse played fair, Jim would also play fair. On his third attempt, Jim had lasted a few more jumps, and he believed that eventually he could ride "that black devil".

At the end of the day, both Jim and Midnight were worn out, but Jim had ridden Midnight without breaking the spirit of the big black horse.

Midnight learned fast after that. He became one of the best cutting horses in Jim's outfit. But only Jim could ride him. If any other cowboy tried it, he was promptly bucked off and with such force that he didn't care to attempt the job again.

Between Jim McNab and Midnight grew a strong friendship, but even Jim had to be careful. If the black fancied himself mistreated, or his natural love of freedom threatened in any way, he would buck, and when he bucked, even McNab was not able to ride him. The horse had never been extended and his "bottom tested", so when Jim had to make a trip to a ranch some ninety miles away, he thought he'd ride Midnight. If the horse became tired he could stop over at a ranch on the way. When the time came for them to leave, Midnight started out proudly, head high, and never stopped once for the whole ninety miles. Neither did Jim have to use spurs.

Jim McNab was very proud of Midnight. He was certain that no man except himself could ride the black. Many persons urged Jim to enter the horse in various stampedes, and finally, because of his pride, Jim entered Midnight in the stampede at Macleod, held to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the coming of the old Royal Northwest Mounted Police. Jim lead Midnight into the arena, and there are many who remember what a magnificent horse the big black

looked that day. He towered above the ordinary stampede horses, and really "stole the show" though he gave the two riders who had drawn him very little satisfaction. He piled them both in short order.

As time went on Jim entered Midnight in other stampedes at local points, and always he bucked off any rider who was brave enough to climb on him. Jim feared that punchers gouging Midnight with spurs would make him an outlaw, and this proved correct; but Jim could not resist seeing the big horse spill the arrogant riders of the Red Deer and Medicine Hat outfits who claimed they could ride him.

Under repeated urging, and taunted by the boasts of would-be conquerers of Midnight, Jim entered him in the big Calgary stampede in 1924. Interest ran very high, and many excellent riders, drawn by the large purses, and the fame that would come to them, were they able to ride Midnight, entered in the contest. The contest was to last three days, and McNab deeply regretted that he had consented to enter his beloved Midnight -- well knowing the punishment the horse would receive. But Jim had given his word and took the horse, who showed nervousness, and was plainly displeased with the whole proceeding. He showed the strain particularly when he was tightly cinched, placed in the narrow chute and surrounded by strangers.

McNab stood by and watched the struggling throung as horses were liberated from the chutes with riders up. He had been pleased when he had learned that one of the most

boastful riders from the Red Deer outfit had drawn Midnight; but Jim was also regretting his decision to enter the horse. For Midnight was excited. He had been taken from the quiet Cottonwood, away from his friends and placed here among strange men who prodded him through the bars of the chute.

Finally Midnight's turn came. It was plain that the horse was insulted and mad clean through. The Red Deer rider took his seat, touched Midnight with the spurs. The signal sounded, the gate flew open and Midnight leaped. On the third jump, he spilled the boaster . . . almost "busted" him, for the man lay still and had to be helped up.

The other great riders were not so confident when they actually beheld Midnight in action. The horse was heroic. In the entire three days, not a single rider was able to stay on his back. Midnight was acclaimed the champion bucking horse of Western Canada.

But Midnight played fair. Not once did he try to kick or jump on a fallen rider. He appeared satisfied when they were bounced off his back, and sometimes he even turned and placed his nose on the fallen man and trotted back to the chute!

During the Calgary stampede, McNab had many offers to sell Midnight; but Jim loved the fearless black and refused them all. He took Midnight back to the Cottonwood, and

let him rest from the exciting struggle. But the relationship between them was changed. Midnight would still come to McNab's whistle or call, and in other ways still showed affection for the boss; but he never forgot or forgave the cruel treatment he had received at Calgary. When McNab tried to ride him, Jim was quickly bucked off.

McNab had feared that this would be the case. He didn't blame Midnight, but was deeply grieved that he had consented to the maltreatment of his great friend.

Possibly it was his grief that lead Jim to sell Midnight, for the horse was now an outlaw and fit only for the arena. He was sold to Peter Welch of Calgary who toured Canada and the United States with his string of rodeo horses.

And now began Midnight's great career as a rodeo horse. His fame spread. He became one of the most renowned horses in America.

One of the best riders in the United States came to grief at the hands of the Canadian champion. Bobby Askins of Ismay, Montana, came halfway across the continent to ride Midnight at Toronto in 1926. For four successive days, Askins watched Midnight buck his men off in the preliminary contensts. On the night before the final day, he expressed the hope that he would draw the big black in the finals.

Askins drew Midnight and twenty-thousand fans crammed the huge stadium at the Toronto Exposition grounds to see

the ride.

It was a good ride, but a short one. When the chute gates opened up, Askins spurred Midnight right behind the ears. The black horse was so astonished that he stood stock still. The packed grandstand roared with laughter as the big horse walked out of the chute with short, mincing steps.

Pete Knight who was perhaps the greatest rider in the world at the time, whispered to a friend, "I wouldn't want to be up there right now for all the money in the world!"

But Midnight was already in action. Down went his head, and on his first terrific leap, he almost shot the Montana cowboy out of the saddle. He clawed his way back desperately, but to little avail. On the eighth jump Midnight tossed Askins high in the air, and then for another four jumps he pitched so high and so hard that one of the stirrups smashed in two as it hit its mate over the saddle.

"He's even better than they said he was," said Askins as they helped him to the first-aid tent.

Two weeks later at Montreal, Pete Knight and Midnight staged the greatest tussle in the memory of the cowboys of the period, and though Pete was still aboard at the conclusion of the ride, he stated that it was the most terrific ride he had ever experienced. This was one of the very few times Midnight was ridden in his thirteen years of rodeo competition.

Midnight was not a "wild" type of outlaw. By nature he was gentle. He would do anything for a few lumps of sugar. He grew to love the competition of the arena, but he never resorted to tricks to unseat his riders. He simply put his head down and bucked, higher and higher at every jump, until on the fifth or sixth jump, he would give a little twist which seemed to catapult the rider out of the saddle as though shot from a gun.

He loved to travel, and when he was sold to Elliot and McCarty of Johnstown, Colorado, he got a chance to travel all over the world -- from Calgary to Fort Worth; from Cheyenne to Madison Square Garden, and finally to Europe.

Midnight died at Elliot and McCarty's Johnstown ranch in 1936. He was twenty years old.

His owners placed a gravestone over his resting place as a tribute to his courage and love of liberty, and on the stone they had inscribed this verse:

Under this sod lies a great bucking hoss,
There never lived a cowboy he could not toss.
His name was Midnight. His coat was black as coal.
If there is a hoss heaven, please God, rest his soul.

And Jim McNab, who was the only man Midnight really loved, is said to have stated:

I miss you, Midnight, since you went away;
The once blue skies have turned to ashen grey --
Seemed to dim the sunshine from the range --
But fond memories of you will never change.